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AP photo

WINNERS: Ryan White, left, and Ben Cotner, co-directors of "The Case Against 8," are joined by their editor Kate Amend onstage after they won the Directing Award: Documentary for their film during the 2014 Sundance Film Festival Awards Ceremony on Saturday.

## **Kokomo native wins big at Sundance**

### **Ben Cotner co-directed documentary 'The Case Against 8.'**

*By Rob Burgess*  
**Tribune night editor**

It may only be his first time in the director's chair, but Kokomo native Ben Cotner won big Saturday in Park City, Utah at the Sundance Film Festival.

Cotner shared the U.S. Documentary Directing prize with co-director Ryan White for their film, "The Case Against 8."

"It's really overwhelming," said Cotner, in a phone interview last week. "I am so happy people are responding to it."

The documentary, which premiered at the festival, was filmed over course of five years. It follows the legal battles to overturn California's Proposition 8, the state's voter-approved constitutional amendment against same-sex marriage. The measure was voted into law in November 2008, and was later overturned by the United States Supreme Court in June 2013. Cotner said he had no idea the case would make it as far as it did when the project began.

"We actually started following the lawyers and the plaintiffs who were involved in the case before they filed the case," said Cotner. "I think we were really lucky with the amount of access we got."

Cotner may be new to directing, but he is no stranger to Hollywood. After graduating from Pitzer College, he spent seven years as an executive at Paramount Classics. And before he left in December to focus full-time on filmmaking, he was senior vice president of acquisitions at Open Road Films.

"Cotner ... played a crucial role in the acquisition of two box-office success stories: Joe Carnahan's action picture 'The Grey' and David Ayer's cop

drama 'End of Watch,'" stated The Hollywood Reporter in 2012 when they named him one of "Hollywood's Fastest-Rising Stars." "He also was instrumental in acquiring ... 'Side Effects,' from Steven Soderbergh, and 'The Host,' based on Stephenie Meyer's book."

Cotner said he was interested in documentaries because of their power to instill empathy. He said the film is specifically poignant now as his home state struggles with similar legislation to Proposition 8; Indiana's proposed constitutional ballot initiative HJR3.

"I think it really opens up people's ability to see what other people's lives are like and how these laws affect them on a personal level," said Cotner.

"And especially in states like Indiana where I grew up that are now grappling with this issue. I wish I could show [the legislators] the film so they could see it isn't really a political issue. It's not really a left or right issue. It has to do with people's civil rights and human rights."

Cotner said the fight over HJR3 hit close to home because of his strong Hoosier roots.

"I grew up in Kokomo and I think it's full of wonderful people; a lot of loving people in Kokomo," he said. "I had a wonderful childhood growing up there. My family is loving and supportive. I've been following [HJR3] from afar just because I do still have so much family still in Indiana and friends who I grew up with that are affected by this."

Cotner said it was never their intent to pass moral judgments on the audience or the subjects of the film. He said the procedure of such a case was fascinating all on its own.

“Right from the very beginning we knew we didn’t want to make a film about whether gay marriage was right or not,” he said. “It really wasn’t the point of the film. We wanted to tell the story of these people and the journey that they were on and the process of taking a case all the way to the Supreme Court, which is, I think, something I don’t think has ever been seen in a documentary film before. So, learning about the American judicial system in that way and learning about what it takes to mount a challenge like this was more our objective than necessarily making it a political issue.”

Cotner said he had other projects in early stages of development, but for the foreseeable future was committed to pushing the film as far and wide as possible. The documentary will premiere on HBO in June.

“We’ll hopefully be showing it at other festivals around the country,” he said. “We’ve received just an outpouring of interest from people all over the country who want to show the film. So, we’d like to take it on the road and really share it with as many people as possible before that as well.”

Cotner said his advice to young people in his hometown hoping to follow in his footsteps was simple: Just do it.

“I think there’s always a lot of voices in the world telling you that you can’t do things or things are too hard,” he said. “Really there’s nothing you can’t learn. The only way you can learn is by doing it. Pick up a camera. Pick up a pen and start writing. That’s really the only way to get anything done.”

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